Theory and Practice in Flexible Learning Environments

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Abstract: Flexible learning environments usually refer to distance education programs; however, competency-based programs have become more popular. These programs fit a departmental goal of providing opportunities specifically designed to teach theory along with opportunities designed to provide practical experiences. The practical experiences allow students to apply the skills and knowledge learned through the content presentation. One superintendent preparation program was rewritten with a competency-based approach. This paper will discuss how the curriculum and instructional strategies provide a 50/50 presentation of theory and practice.

Introduction

With the growing cost of higher education, students need options to make it more accessible for them to attend. Additionally, students face geographic limitations and/or time constraints preventing them from pursuing further education (Erickson & Larwin, 2016). Flexible learning environments offer options to address these challenges in a number of ways such as varying the duration of instruction, providing creative learning activities, and offering practical assessments and resources (Naidu, 2017). The growth in the enrollment of students in distance education programs demonstrates how students are seeking nontraditional ways to access higher education (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Macharia & Pelser, 2012).

Initially, distance education programs allowed some students to attend higher education courses regardless of their location, which helped with the time constraint and cost issues. Students have been able to take courses without relocating. Additionally, these courses do not require the same type of set time constraints as face-to-face courses (Naidu, 2017). In asynchronous courses, students may complete work according to their own schedule. In most cases, the work completed is text-based (Bowman, 2010). Synchronous courses do require some type of meetings at specific times, but the times are usually less restrictive than traditional face-to-face courses. These meetings may be with the entire class, a small group, or individually with the instructor (Park & Bonk, 2007). Another type of flexible learning environment, competency-based program, has further addressed these issues. Programs developed according to the competency-based approach focuses on the "skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task" (Jones & Voorhees, 2002, p. 1). These tasks generally relate to a specific career or role within a career field (Banta, 2001) and are defined by program standards (Ott, Bacca, Cisneros, & Bates, 2014). With the employment focus, competency-based programs also offer students practical experiences. Practical experiences may be part of specific assignments or related to experiences outside of the course content such as tasks performed as a part of the job (Walters, 2016).

Experiential Learning

In a review of the literature in academic journals, a sound theoretical framework with which to anchor a pilot competency-based program stood out. Kolb's experiential learning theory provides insight into the value of providing a variety of competency-based experiences for students. This theory posits the importance of experience and engagement as key components to development and learning, which is essential in higher education (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Kolb's experiential learning cycle involves four stages of experience: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). To apply this theoretical framework in a competency-based program, students learn content and theory in their coursework (concrete) while observing current professionals, writing reflections, and participating in discussions to conceptualize what they learn (reflective observation & abstract conceptualization) and creating artifacts for use out in the field (active experimentation). This method takes students full circle and allows them to have a full transformative learning experience while working through the courses.

Competency-based courses have several benefits, such as authenticity, flexibility, and marketability (Curry & Docherty, 2017), while allowing students to actively participate in designing their own learning goals (Marine, 2017), and obtain non-classroom learning experiences (Walter, 2016). Additionally, competency-based courses allow professors to clearly articulate what their students should be able to demonstrate in the real world as professionals (Marine, 2017). As Curry and Docherty (2017) explained, a goal for competency-based education is to equip students to navigate a changing society with ease. As students complete assignments, they should be able to experience their future career in realistic and practical ways, which should equip them to step into the new role with artifacts and experiences for success.

Competency-Based Programs

Competency-based programs may first be considered distance education programs, however, these programs offer some additional flexible options. Enrollment of competency-based programs has increased along with the increased enrollment in distance education programs (Crawford, 2015). Competency-based programs differ from distance education programs due to the complete focus on mastery of the content, standards, and/or competencies. Assignments are structured to allow students to demonstrate mastery using their prior knowledge (Jacobsen, 2015). With the varying degrees of prior knowledge, students are able to progress through the different tasks at their own pace (Jacobsen, 2015).

Additionally, adult learners' desire to be actively involved in the learning process (Knowles, 1984), which also fits the competency-based approach. Developing quality assignments focused on specific tasks allowing for the use of students' prior knowledge can be a challenge. Courses need to be structured to address needs of a diverse student population, differentiate instruction, and meet requirements for time of engagement with the content. Individual assignments should provide experiences where students have a basis to continue to build their scaffold of new knowledge (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Assignments should be developed to mimic real-world situations in which students can apply their knowledge and demonstrate mastery (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Real-world situations provide students a clear connection between the course content and their actual role within their career field engaging students in problem-centered assessments (Knowles, 1984). The complexity of this type of assignment should include work-based types of projects to fit the

career focus. Data from these assignments, or assessments, can then be used as formative assessments to determine the next step, or summative assessments to determine mastery of the concepts (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

Superintendents

The number of superintendents in Texas has continued to decline for the last six years (Ramsey, 2016), which was also reflected in program enrollment. Similar challenges facing all students seeking higher education, such as cost, access, and the need for flexibility, may be contributing factors to the declining number of superintendents and those seeking to be superintendents (Appana, 2008). In an effort to address some of these challenges, the program to prepare school superintendents for certification in Texas was developed as a competency-based program focused on incorporating practical experiences with course content based on the Texas Education Agency competencies.

As the leader of a school system, the superintendent influences educational outcomes at all levels through his or her leadership and decisions. Their leadership establishes the learning environment and determines if it will be learner-centered. Eight standards, developed by the Texas Education Agency, outline the duties and responsibilities of a superintendent in the Texas Administrative Code (TAC). The standards include the skills and knowledge needed and consist of 1) Learner-centered values and ethics of leadership, 2) Learner-centered leadership and school district culture, 3) Learner-centered human resources leadership and management, 4) Learner-centered policy and governance, 5) Learner-centered communications and community relations, 6) Learner-centered organizational leadership & management, 7) Learner-centered curriculum planning and development, and 8) Learner-centered instructional leadership & management (TAC, 2009).

Methodology

A pilot program implementing a competency-based approach was provided for a small group of school superintendent candidates at a regional university in Texas. Two different courses, the Role of the Superintendent and Superintendent Internship in Education, included in the program presents the theories needed as well as opportunities to apply those theories. Candidates participated in hands-on experiences followed by reflections to encourage conceptualization (Anderson, Hsu, & Kinney, 2016). The Department of Curriculum and Instruction works to develop programs with 50 percent theory and 50 percent experiential or practical learning. Students were not limited to the traditional semester time frame. They were given up to 18 months to complete the two courses and earn credit. This approach would be considered a hybrid direct program with the combination of the competency-based design and credit hours (SACSCOC, 2016).

For the students to earn credit, course requirements for a competency-based program were similar to those of a traditional course. In general, students should plan to spend about three hours on course work per week for every hour of credit they should earn from a course. For a 15-week semester course, a minimum of 45 hours of work would be expected of the students for three hours of credit. If the course is face-to-face, then this time frame would also include the classroom time. With the competency-based course, these hours should also include practical experiences in the field. In this distance learning environment, practical experiences may be difficult to plan for considering the various situation where students are located. Detailed descriptions of assignments including the purpose, expectations, and criteria for success provided by the transparency design model was used to deliver the content for the Role of the Superintendent course to help candidates be successful (Winkelmes, Bowles-Terry, Granoutsos, and Humphreys, 2015). Since instructors and students are located in different places for distance education programs (THECB, 2018), various types of communication were employed in these courses to encourage communication between students and the professor as well as among the students. Students were encouraged to share experiences as well as ideas for experiences that fit assignment criteria.

Data Collection and Analysis

Theory and practical experiences were included throughout both courses. To evaluate the presentation of theory and the requirement of practical experiences, a variety of data were collected and examined. Assignments within the course included opportunities for self-reflection on the students' own learning as well as on the content, competency application, and goal setting. Students were also asked to provide suggestions for the course content and structure to help with understanding and navigation.

Data related to the time needed to complete each module were determined using the Rice University Course Workload Estimator for written assignments (Rice, 2018) to calculate part of the workload estimations. The timing determined for this course was based on the interaction a student would have with the content based on the assignments and specific assignments. However, this focus failed to include an analysis of the time students could spend communicating with instructors as well as other students. Within the courses, there were several opportunities for students to collaborate. For example, students were able to post questions, resources, and encouragement through a Class Cafe link. This enabled students to work together as they applied theory to practice as they were able to give each other feedback and ideas for activities and resources in the field. Additionally, instructors were able to respond and guide the discussions to ensure relevance and accuracy related to the competencies.

Whereas the students assumed most of the responsibility for their learning and success, there were several measures in place to guide the candidates through purposeful experiences relating to the role of the superintendent. Within the course in Blackboard, the students were provided a link to the §242.15 superintendent standards, as well as a log, evaluation documents, and reflections, which were all aligned with these standards. Additionally, the students were assigned a site supervisor (mentor) and field supervisor (evaluator) to help them collaboratively determine and obtain at least 160 clock hours of experiences, activities, and projects relating to the standards as they put theory into practice.

For accountability, students submitted a running log to document experiences in each of the superintendent standards. With each of these submissions, they provided a personal reflection to show evidence they were gaining a full understanding of the application of the standards in practice. These reflections also provided support for the competency-based nature of the program.

Three times during the semester, the field supervisor conducted the following activities: a pre-observation conference to discuss progress towards practicing the standards; an evaluation to document superintendent practices observed; and a post-observation conference with the student and site supervisor to provide verbal and written feedback on progress towards mastering the standards. To tie everything together for the final assignment, students completed a self-evaluation on their perceived competence for each of the superintendent standards.

At the completion of the course, the various data collected included: site and field supervisor training documentation; a spreadsheet of student internship locations; field supervisor evidence of ongoing communication and support; records of observations, including activities observed and field supervisor feedback; student documentation, including completed logs, evaluations, and reflections; evaluation reports with scores on student progress in the standards; and survey results garnering feedback on student success, field supervisor effectiveness, and the strength of the course design to help students meet goals and attain an understanding of practical application of the superintendent standards. All of the data are housed in the departmental folder and used for documentation for the accreditation agency, as well as for program improvement. Overall, the data indicated student success towards conceptualizing the superintendent standards into practical application.

Conclusion

The combination of the two types of assignments contribute to the minimum required hours of work for the 15 credits for the program. Students who participate in this program are able to focus on the specific skills and knowledge related to the role of the superintendent while earning graduate credit. By converting this program to a competency-based approach, the issues of cost, location, and timing were addressed along with the need to offer a varying instructional time frame, creative learning activities, and practical assessments and resources (Naidu, 2017).

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